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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [IR](#) [QA](#)
SUBJECT: QATAR: BALANCING GEOGRAPHIC INTERESTS WITH IRAN,
STRATEGIC INTERESTS WITH U.S.

REF: A. DOHA 416
[1](#)B. DOHA 417
[1](#)C. DOHA 432

Classified By: Amb Joseph LeBaron for reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

(C) KEY POINTS

-- Qatar has been one of the most highly public supporters of President Ahmadinejad in the aftermath of the Iranian election. The Amir, the Crown Prince, and the Prime Minister all have congratulated Ahmadinejad and endorsed Iran's "democracy."

-- The official visit by Ali Larijani, Iran's Speaker of Parliament, to Qatar July 5th is just the latest sign of Qatar's willingness to publicly support the Iranian regime.

-- Also, Major General Al Attiyeh, Qatar's defense chief of staff, is now on a 4-day trip to Iran to hold discussions with Iranian foreign affairs and defense ministers. Embassy's high-level Ministry of Defense contacts say the Chief of Staff was simply maintaining open communications and a working relationship with Iranian military and civilian leadership. Qatar's Chief of Staff also reportedly requested that Iran's military and naval vessels remain clear of Qatari oil and gas fields, a continuing issue for Qatar.

-- Interestingly, Al Jazeera apparently has become a contested issue in the Qatar-Iran relationship. That is surprising, since Al Jazeera provided only minimal coverage of post-election events in Iran, at least compared to its coverage of other recent regional conflicts, such as Gaza.

(C) COMMENTS

-- Qatar's public support for the Iranian regime adds an important caveat to the recent public and private efforts by Qatar's leaders to enhance strategic relations with the United States (see refs B-C).

-- But Qatar's highly public rhetorical support for Iran should also be seen as an expression of Qatar's strong desire for a stable strategic environment and for a working relationship with Iran that ensures Qatar's continued freedom to exploit the two countries' shared gas field, the largest non-associated gas field in the world.

-- Qatar's leaders do not see their active public support for Iran as contradicting their self-described "strategic alignment" with the United States. Rather, they see their public expressions of support for Iran as a necessary hedge to protect Qatar's vital economic interests.

-- A full Embassy analysis of Qatar's balancing act with Iran

is at the end of this cable (paras 8-14).

End Key Points and Comments.

¶1. (U) On June 14, just two days after the Iranian election, Qatar's Amir Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani became one of the first world leaders to publicly congratulate Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on his re-election, despite the uncertainty and accusations of massive fraud. He later followed up with a phone call.

-- The Crown Prince, Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani, and the Prime Minister also sent congratulatory cables to Ahmadinejad.

¶2. (U) Despite active opposition inside and outside Iran to the conduct of the Iranian elections, Qatar's Amir kept up his support for the legitimacy of the Iranian election. He even praised the quality of governance in Iran.

-- On June 22, while on a state visit to France, the Amir re-iterated his acceptance of the election results. He also expressed his hope that stability would soon return to Iran, which he described as not only an important country for Qatar, but for the Gulf and the West.

-- At a press conference in Paris, the Amir spoke highly of Iran's government, labeling it a "practicing democracy."

-- The Amir also reportedly pressed the issue of stability in Iran with French President Nicholas Sarkozy, one of the most forceful critics of the election.

¶3. (SBU) On July 5, Iranian parliamentary speaker and former nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani paid an official two-day visit to Qatar. He met with the Amir as part of a visit to discuss bilateral and regional issues, with an emphasis on economic cooperation between the two countries, according to press reports.

-- According to a local Qatari press account, Larijani had planned well before the elections to visit Qatar shortly after the poll took place, but post-election unrest delayed his visit.

¶4. (SBU) Larijani and the Amir were quoted in press releases from their meeting warmly praising the other country's foreign policies.

-- Larijani extolled Qatar's regional diplomacy, calling it "active and effective." He proceeded to praise the "brotherly country" of Qatar for the positions it has taken on controversial issues, including the Israeli-Palestinian issue and Lebanon.

-- The Amir reciprocated Larijani's warm words on the Palestinian issue. He declared that resolving the Palestinian issue is the biggest problem in the Middle East, implicitly rebutting Israeli and Western assertions that Iran presents the greatest danger to the region.

¶5. (SBU) Both men addressed Iran's contested elections, with Larijani toeing the Supreme Leader's line and the Amir re-stating his earlier endorsement of the election results.

-- Larijani said that the elections were "sheer proof of democracy in Iran." He underlined the reported 85 percent voter turnout, proudly proclaiming that such levels of participation are not reached in the West.

-- The Amir summed up Qatar's attitude towards relations with Iran by saying Qatar has no problem with Iran and "we shall not allow anyone to create problems between us."

¶6. (C) Al Jazeera, the satellite television network heavily funded by the GOQ, was almost certainly discussed during the meeting between the Amir and Larijani, since the meeting was also attended by Al Jazeera Chairman Hamad Bin Thamer Al

Thani.

-- (SBU) Al Jazeera's coverage of the Iranian election and its aftermath has been scanty by comparison to other hot topics in the region, such as Gaza.

-- (C) In an office call with the Ambassador on June 22 (see Ref A), Al Jazeera's Director General Wadah Khanfar attributed his network's sparse coverage of the election to a difficult operating environment for journalists in Iran.

-- (C) While conceding that Iran had few objections to Al Jazeera's election reporting, Khanfar asserted that Iran "hates" the network for its coverage of Iraq. According to him, Iran believes that AJ's reporting advances a pro-Sunni agenda in Iraq.

¶7. (SBU) Meanwhile, on July 7, Qatar's Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, Major-General Hamad Bin Ali Al Attiyeh arrived in Tehran to begin the first stage of defense discussions with the Iranian Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Minister, General Mostafa Mohammad-Najjar.

-- The Chief of Staff subsequently met Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki, who said that military relations between the two countries have a "special place" in the relationship.

-- (C) High level Qatari Ministry of Defense officials reported that the Chief of Staff was maintaining open communications and a working relationship with Iranian military and civilian leadership. Qatar's Chief of Staff also reportedly requested that Iran's military and naval vessels remain clear of Qatari oil and gas fields.

-- (C) The Chief of Staff mentioned to Ambassador in April that he would probably be visiting Iran later in the year, but he stressed that the USG should not read too much into the visit. The visit would not be a signal that Qatar's military policies towards Iran were changing.

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¶8. (C) The Amir's rapid recognition of the election results reflects Qatar's need for a stable strategic environment and his eagerness to stay in the good graces of the Iranian

establishment. Qatar's leadership most likely calculated that a quick resolution to the election would result in a more stable Iran, which the Amir has said is good for the region as a whole.

¶9. (C) It is more difficult to parse the Larijani visit. While Larijani was an early critic of the Guardian Council's favoritism toward Ahmadinejad, he was a supporter of the regime as the protests gathered steam.

-- (C) The Speaker's visit to Qatar may reflect just the fulfillment of a previous commitment. In remarks made during the visit, Larijani made a point of saying that his trip had been scheduled to take place earlier, but had been delayed due to the post-election turmoil.

¶10. (C) Whatever the time-line for the trip's planning, it is noteworthy that the visit occurred while Qatar is making a serious effort to upgrade its political relationship with the United States.

-- (C) In an interview with Al Jazeera (ref C) and in private discussions with the Ambassador, Prime Minister Hamad Bin Jassim Al Thani stressed that his country has a "strategic relationship" with the U.S. He also proposed a "strategic dialogue" to Acting A/S Feltman during his recent trip to Qatar, emphasizing that "we are working toward one end" (ref B).

¶11. (C) The dichotomy between Qatar's public support for Iran and its stated intent to be strategically aligned with the United States is not in Qatar's eyes a contradiction, but a necessary balancing act.

¶12. (C) As Assistant Foreign Minister Bou'aynayn told Ambassador July 8th, Qatar's policy toward Iran has not changed. Qatar's policies towards Iran are "the same before the (Iranian) election as they are after the election," he said. Qatar remains close to the United States on "the nuclear file" and other regional issues.

¶13. (C) While emphasizing that the elections are an internal Iranian affair, Al-Bou'aynayn said Qatar has a common border and vital interests that are impacted by Iran. That geopolitical fact requires Qatar to maintain proper ties with its neighbor. The Assistant Minister underscored that Qatar has no problem having a dialogue with the United States that includes the issue of Iran.

¶14. (C) Nevertheless, even as Qatar may privately share many of the same views and concerns on Iran as the United States, the USG can anticipate that Qatar will be careful not to antagonize the Iranian regime. The pattern of Qatar's public support for the post-election regime is a strong indication of that fundamental policy.

-- (C) Qatar's relationship with its much larger neighbor must be seen through the prism of its long-term, strategic economic interests. Qatar shares the world's largest non-associated gas field with Iran -- the North Field and South Pars gas field. Qatar's security and prosperity depend primarily on continued access to that field. That access, in turn, depends significantly on Doha maintaining a positive relationship with Tehran.

LeBaron